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The Wild White Snow Gum

BETTY CASEY

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ALSO BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

"A Quart Pot on My Saddle"

"Coolringdon"

The Wild White Snow Gum

Collected Verse

by

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Photographs by John Casey

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Dedication

"To John" — of course!

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THE WILD WHITE SNOW GUM

"Have you a favourite tree?" they asked,
Knowing I love all trees.
"The Scarlet Oak or Silver Birch?
Could it be one of these?

"What of the Willow's slender green?
Or the Poplar's dark red vein?
Is it the pink of the Chestnut flowers
That border the grey-green Seine?

"Is it the Larch? or the age-old Beech
In whose shadow the Primrose grow?
The delicate Acacia Tree
With its blossom of scented snow?

"Your first love? Is it the noble Pine?
The Oak? or the Aspen Tree?
Or the strong wild green Pisonia
That holds a tryst with the sea?"

So many glorious far-famed trees!
Yet never a doubt in mind,
The tree that I love the best of all
Is quite a different kind.

Alone on the ranges, wild and white,
Torn by the winds and snow,
Twisted arms as in anguish flung,
Where no other tree could grow.

Silvery satin pointed leaves
Sighing a haunting sound,
Tumbled flowers with a honeyed scent
Lying upon the ground.

Storm clouds threaten its purity
And solitude is King
Where it grows on the ranges, twisted, bent,
A wild, white, beautiful thing!

THERE'S A DAFFODIL OUT ON THE TERRACE

There's a daffodil out on the terrace!
A frail golden bud on the terrace!
How could such a fairy remember
To open its eyes in September?
The silken stem, gently caressing,
Bowed down to the earth with a blessing.

Oh! There's a daffodil out on the terrace!
A shy peri flower on the terrace!
Soft, fluffy frilled clouds slowly drifting;
Clear bells of the snowdrops are lifting;
How can all the changelings remember
To open their eyes in September?

I RODE A RAINBOW

One enchanted morning I was riding on the plain
And saw the pale world waking through a veil of silver rain.
There were clouds, deep ruffed with primrose
Where the sun was breaking through;
And a slender opal rainbow, split the wide pearl sky in two.

I rode my gentle pony across the scented earth
To where the shining rainbow gave its trembling fragile birth.
We climbed up high and higher, on that heavenly band of light
And looked down on the world below in exquisite delight.

The things I saw were coloured things.
A butterfly with bright blue wings.
Grey eucalyptus — silver tipped.
A native boy, brown-eyed — red-lipped.

Across the flowered, rain-drenched ground
A brown snake moved without a sound.
A small lake turned from pink to grey:
All this I saw at break of day.

From high upon my opal arch
I saw a flock of emu march.
We stood so still, my horse and I,
On that gay rainbow in the sky.

On that enchanted morning when I rode across the plain,
And climbed the fragile rainbow through a veil of silver rain:
I thanked the Lord deep in me, as we started to descend,
For leading me through Heaven right to the rainbow's end.

A PALE LOST STAR OR TWO

When I have grown too old to ride the ranges with my horse,
And crack my whip, and roll my swag, I'll feel a deep remorse.
Memories will come crowding of the silvered morning dew,
Of golden camp fires burning, and a pale lost star or two!
Again I'll hear the stories that were told by Jim and Jack.
The day they lost the big roan mare with all their camping pack!
And how they swam "The Snowy" in the "biggest ever" flood!
The day they nearly died of thirst, and drank their horses' blood!

I'll look back on the morning that I saddled young black Nell;
We'd been galloping down "the Bogong," after brumbies, when she fell.
I lay there in the bushes with a broken arm and leg
For sixteen hours, that seemed like days, near a surveyor's peg;
They found me in the evening, Jim and Jack and one-eyed Bill,
And made a sapling stretcher as they swung me up the hill;
Jim gave me a hot rum toddy, and it eased the aching, but
I blacked out as they stumbled near the doorway of the hut.

There was Rusty — red-haired shearer, who liked droving for a change.
He often came along with me across the mountain range;

He coudn't ride to save his life, that big, good-humoured Rust.
He'd laugh and scramble up again each time he hit the dust!
I see him now — his freckled face all caked with mud and sweat;
He'd grin at me — "you know, old pal, I think they'll get me yet."
And that's what happened. Late one night he saddled up a nag
And strapped on coats and camping gear — even a water bag!
She took fright in the moonlight — bucked like mad, then tripped and shied.
"I should 'ave known much better." He gripped my hand and died.

I'll have the memories good and strong when I'm too old to ride,
I'll close my eyes and see again the rugged mountain side.
I'll hear old Bill and Jim and Jack, and grand old Rusty, too,
Tell tales around the smouldering fires of what they used to do;
I'll smell the wet grass after rain and see the pale stars shine,
And see the bright red coals that make a damper good and fine;
And some day on a mountain side, beneath a snow gum tree,
Perhaps a weathered wooden cross will 'mind some folks of me.

THE LAKE

Between two hills like a gem it lay,
Mother of pearl, for the sky was grey,
Feathered frills lapped its thyme-edged shore,
Colours the same as the wild duck wore!

It lay like a gem between two hills,
Sapphire blue with an edge of frills;
A black swan glided across its breast;
In the silken reeds was her royal nest.

The lake glowed red like a ruby fire
Filled with the glow of the sun's desire.
An eagle perched on a manna tree
And saw the things that a bird can see.

The lake was an emerald, dark and still,
As it kissed the edge of each high, round hill;
Brown water fowl fluttered, small humble things,
Shaking the pearls off their polished wings.

The lake was an opal, pink and blue,
Purple, orange and primrose, too;
Watching the fast approaching night
Its surface turned to a milky white.

Eight bright-eyed duck flew over the lake,
Each one so sure of the way to take;
It lay below like a sleeping thing,
Shadows thrown by each gilded wing.

Between two hills like a gem it lay,
Eagerly waiting the breaking day;
A sighing silver virgin lake,
And I who was privileged saw it wake!

COOMA — 6.30 a.m.

THE MONTH OF AUGUST

The ghost-like township lay before me through a veil of smoke.
Tall, slender church spires. A tangled cloud that broke!
An empty street, a dark house silhouette.
Blue silver smoke whirled upward, lost itself and yet
It was but a town awakening!
Fires lit to cook the food of everyday,
To warm cold houses and to start young children on their way
To school. Unreal it looked, this mountain town that lay below me.
A stray dog limped its way along a silvered street,
And through the roughened grass beside the road, I traced its tiny feet.
Somewhere an engine shrieked. A thicker smoke plumed up into the sky,
And then, as if it tired of so much noise, a black toy engine glided slowly by.
I watched it like another "Brigadoon,"
Expecting with a thrilling, cold delight,
The unreal spires of churches, mystic tipped, the silver street, would vanish from my sight.
Somewhere there were people in this town—
Real people who had lit small smoking fires,
Who, safe behind locked doors and lowered blinds,
Were living lives of longing and desires:
Who, when the sun had climbed the nearest hill
And pierced the clinging veil of early shadows sweet,
Would don gray caps and coats and fur-lined boots
And step into a silver, blue-lined street.

I WAS A PART OF WILD BUSH THINGS

I boiled my billy in the shade
That great white mantled snow-gums made;
I tied my horse and dropped my swag
And took chops from the saddle bag.

My two dogs watched without surprise,
Deepest devotion in their eyes;
I stooped to stroke each loyal head.
"Man's truest friend," so Kipling said.

The fire I made was small and neat
Of bark and twigs and gum leaves sweet.
I watched the feathered smoke curl high
And lose itself against the sky.

And sitting there beneath the tree
All cares and worries slipt from me;
I was a part of wild bush things;
Gold dust upon an insect's wings.

Small brown ants with their manna hoard.
I clasped my hands and thanked the Lord.
Cream, scented blossoms fell on me.
Oh! I could smell and I could see!

My chop was good — the tea was strong,
And in my heart there was a song:
"Let all shy, wild, bush things survive,
And Lord — I'm glad that I'm alive!"

APPLE PIE INN

England

I stopped in a lane where the hedges were high,
Wild roses and foxgloves were growing close by.
A blackbird was singing — his call high and thin,
When I asked for a room at "The Apple Pie Inn."

"Of course you're welcome," the landlady said,
"Careful your step now, and mind your tall head,
I've a room with a window that looks on the field;
It's sheep you'll be watching, and this summer's yield."

I followed her carefully up the oak stairs:
Past rows of bright pewter and two rocking chairs.
Then, watching my step as she told me to do,
I stepped in the room with the fairy-tale view.

The field lay below me, emerald green,
Lambs frisked and frolicked — the whitest I'd seen:
A golden brown haystack stood, neat thatched with sheaves,
And a scented pink woodbine smothered the eaves.

Enchanted, I leant on the low window sill,
Forgetful; unmindful, I stayed there until
A voice said behind me. "Your meal's ready, Sir,"
And I straightened my tie as I walked after her.

A tiny round table was polished like silk.
A jar of clear honey; a pitcher of milk.
Fresh scones and muffins with butter piled high;
And frosted with cream, a gold apple pie!

TREES

I love trees. Just any kind of tree.
The world is mine, when they stretch branches over me.

* * *

Not only mighty Oaks; or Chestnuts with their fragile candle flowers;
Or Silver Birch; more silvered with the tears of April showers.

Not only lofty Pines, or yellow Cypress with their burst of gold;
Or Weeping Willows trailing slender fingers in the shimmering waters cold.

I love the Eucalyptus, with its sweet wild scented breath,
And the smaller, rough Mimosa, that grows thickly underneath;

The tiny, hardwood Cherry, with its round fruit, deeply red;
And the lean, grey Casuarina, with its palely silver head.

If only I could tell the world the joy that comes to me
Each time I touch the scented bark — or lie beneath a tree!

A FOOL—AM I?

"What will you take for the little white pony?"
He asked, as he rolled his limp cigarette.
"Some fool thought you'd ask half a hundred!
I tell you my offer's as good as you'll get.
You know yourself she isn't a chicken—
She's no good in harness, and jibs at a gate.
I haven't much patience — snap up this offer—
You'd better be quick — or I'll say it's too late."
I looked at the mean, mottled face of the speaker,
And read there the thoughts no words would define.
The slit, narrow eyes with a restless inquiry,
Though anxious to look, would never meet mine.
"What made you think I'll sell the old pony?
And what do you want her for? Answer me that!
You know that she's old, bow-legged and a jibber."
"I'm only concerned with the fact that she's fat—
I'm sending a load of them down to the knackers;
I need one more horse to make up the truck.
It has to be small. They're jammed in so tightly
Those brumbies won't have half an inch in — to buck."
He laughed as he scraped his shoe on the horse rail,
Black, shiny patent with small, pointed toe.
The loathing I felt made my hand grip the bridle
That held the old mare with a mane like new snow.
Somehow I managed to swallow my hatred.
"What do you want for the load as it stands?"
For the first time his eyes met mine in inquiry—
Then fell, and looked down at his lean, dirty hands.
"If I'm lucky I hope to make a clear hundred.
The old draughts will bring in a tenner or two,
And the racehorse and foal will make 'a twenty'—
But what in the dickens is all this to you?"

I loathed him so much, I picked up the stock whip;
"I'll give you a cheque — I haven't much cash,
But I know of a use for those gallant 'old brumbies'
That's a long damn sight better than dog-meat—or hash."
Uncertain, he followed me into the office
And looked at the cheque I handed to him.
"Now get out — and get going!" I said, as he halted;
I still held the whip — my face hard and grim.
He didn't look back as he ran past the stockyard,
I didn't believe that the fellow *could* run.
I swung out the whip, and cracked it like lightning;
It sounded to him like the shot of a gun.

I slowly unloaded the truck of old horses;
The friendly old draughts—four black and two bay;
And turned them into a small lucerne paddock,
And gave them fresh water, and new meadow hay.
The nervous old racehorse stepped down with her filly,
Shy and uncertain it pranced at her side.
I thought of the times she had raced with her colours—
Somebody's heartache, and somebody's pride!
Next came the ponies—four roan and four chestnut;
Strong, sound and young, with wide, frightened eyes—
Straight down the ramp with short, nervous whinnies—
Quick turn of head, and a jump of surprise.

Was I fool to have bought these "old brumbies"?
Save them the shunting — the swing of each bend?
Save them the days and nights in the stockyards,
So often foodless — with death at the end!
The little brown filly pranced past me gaily;
The solid old draughts lay down in the hay—
I smiled as I thought of the paper that bought them—
If I was a fool — then a fool I would stay.

THE ISLE OF SKYE

It tumbled out of Heaven, the misty Isle of Skye,
And fell upon a rainbow that was hanging out to dry.
Then gently, very gently, it was lowered to the earth
Where "The Cruillins" and the heather and the lochs were given birth.

The moon poured down its silver on a sleeping Highland fold;
The sun sent down a blessing and the lochs were rippling gold.
The wind caressed the heather and the slender rowan trees;
And the crofter in his cottage was a part with each of these.

Among the tumbled heather stand the stacks of drying peat:
The blue smoke from the chimneys smells incredibly sweet:
For the Angels spread their snowy wings as it went tumbling by
When it tumbled out of Heaven, "The Misty Isle of Skye."

LIVING

Windswept, sundrenched golden plains;
Richest emerald when it rains.
Lucerne, rye grass, clover sweet,
Underneath my pony's feet.

Towering mountains capped with snow,
Where the wild, white daisies grow;
Winding tracks through scented grass,
Where I, and my white pony pass.

OH, IT'S RAINING!

It's raining! and I'm singing!
There are bells in Heaven ringing,
And I hear them ringing gladly in my heart.
Sweet-scented red-topped clover
And lucerne nearly over,
And the sapphire crow's-foot flower about to start!

Oh! it's raining! Like a blessing
The poor thirsty earth caressing.
All the dams and waterholes are full at last.
The cold winter's endless battle
Feeding starving sheep and cattle
Now a grim and hungry nightmare of the past.

It's raining! raining! raining!
Fine slender grass is deigning
To push its emerald sheaf above the ground,
As the ponies' hoofs are sinking
We, one and all, are thinking
What a wet, sweet, sucking, squelching sound!

Oh! it's raining! I am singing.
All the bells in Heaven are ringing.
As the big grey clouds come tumbling to the earth.
There is scented red-topped clover
And the lucerne, nearly over,
Will come again, a lavender re-birth.

WHERE TWO RIVERS MET

We saddled up the horses just before the break of dawn.
There was "Mousey" - "Tim" - and "Polly," and the one-eyed mare "Forlorn";
There was great big lumbering "Willie," whom we saddled with the pack,
And a lively, silver gelding, we had christened "Happy Jack."

There were cattle to be mustered just beyond the Charcoal Range;
John was riding sturdy "Polly"—I took "Mousey" for a change.
Over wide Grose's Plains we cantered, leaving Jindabyne behind;
Through the Muzzlewood's dark branches, seamed with green and purple lined,
'Til we came to Ilgelbyra, where an emu strutted by;
Two small cottages sent spirals blue and silver to the sky.

"Jackie" trotted gaily forward, and old "Tim" brought up the rear.
John was in the lead on "Polly"; close by "Willie" with the gear.
Down the muddy track we trotted, scented trees and scented earth,
'Til we came to Jacob's River, where the mountain stream gave birth
To a tossing, seething water, drenching rocks and mountain grass,
Where it joined the lovely "Snowy" in a hidden emerald pass.

Purple sarsaparilla mingled with the trees along the bank;
And we stood; our sweating horses trotted to the edge, and drank.
In the stillness of the valley, shy red robins stretched their wings.
Two wild rivers sang their passion, mountains reigned the valley's kings.

By the sweet campfire we squatted, watching embers glow and die.
Stars came out in all their glory, spangling the wide, blue sky;
Somewhere we could hear a cow-bell; clear it sounded in the night,
And a mopoke's lonely calling added to the sheer delight
Of that valley in the mountains where two lovely rivers met.
Close beside the tethered horses munched their chaff. The fire burnt low, and yet
We lingered on, as if afraid to break the spell that chained us there:
Two rivers sang a holy song, and there was sweetness everywhere.

Tomorrow we must ride the range, from early morn 'till dusk:
But now we smoked our pipes and smelt the fragrance of the musk;
There were cattle to be mustered in those steep hills, wild and strange;
But tonight we shared the secrets of the sombre Charcoal Range.

RAIN ON THE ROOF

It's a wonderful sound! the rain on the roof
When it hasn't been heard for so long.
The ping-pong-ping, and the drip, drip, drip,
And the guttering gurgling its song.

It's a wonderful sound! the rain on the roof
As I lie tucked up in my bed.
From my window I see the long, wet lawn
And a hollyhock hanging her head.

It's a wonderful sound! the rain on the roof
And the splash on the window pane.
A bird flies past with a worm in its beak
And the river is flowing again.

It's a wonderful sound! the rain on the roof
A music composed by the gods!
The wet, sweet breath of the spangled flowers,
The roses bursting their pods!

It's a wonderful sound! the rain on the roof,
A hollyhock hanging her head:
A wild bird flying with silvered wings;
As I lie tucked up in my bed.

TOM—DICK—AND HARRY

They were "Tom" and "Dick" and Harry,"
And we bought them at a sale.
I had my eye on Harry
As we leant against the rail.

He was small, and round and sturdy,
With a kind and friendly eye;
But *not* the kind of pony
That a show rider would buy!

Still I liked him — liked his wither
And his strong, unshod round feet,
And the lighting in his brown eyes
That would hate to own defeat!

I rode him round the paddocks,
And I rode him on the range;
He could turn upon a sixpence,
Cross the legs and make a change.

He was kind and true and docile,
And I grew to love that horse;
Everybody asked to ride him;
Everybody smiled, of course

At his small, untidy figure,
With his stringy mane and tail!
But I blessed the day I bought him
At the dusty country sale.
"Tom" was big and rough and placid,
One part cob and three part draught.

"Ought to make a damn good racehorse
If you brush him up!" they laughed.
Tom turned out a first-class leader
Long before the tractors came.
Powerful, tireless, always willing,
Old black Tom would play the game.

Last came "Dick"—a perfect skewbald,
And a first-class rogue as well.
He could open every gateway,
Duck his head and buck like hell!
Once he threw the overseer
Clean into the woolshed dam!
Then he stood and drank beside him!
Sniffed the air, and turned and ran!
Every showring Dick paraded,
Proudly stepping, head held high,
Smartly walking, smartly trotting,
He would catch the Judge's eye.
But when he was sent to canter
And to make the figure "8,"
I, before he left the Judges,
Knew just what would be his fate!
One day when he won a ribbon
For the led-in gelding class,
Prancing proudly round the show ring
Churning up the young, new grass,
Admiration showered upon him,
Many show men asked to buy.
"Put a price on, and I'll pay it,"
One man said, and wondered why

I refused the handsome offer
For the showy skewbald horse.
Sometimes when I stroked his forelock
I would feel an odd remorse,
That this beauty was not docile,
Not completely safe to ride,
That he lacked the gentle manners
And real comradeship beside.
He would always be an outlaw,
Longing to be wild and free.
Bending to the bit and leathers,
Never wholly true to me.

Years have passed and Tom and Harry
Sleep beneath a snow gum's shade.
Wild jays build a nest above them,
Joyous of this thing they made.
Dick alone is in the stable,
Twenty-five and sound of limb;
Quick to lift his head and whinny
When I softly talk to him—
"Grand old horse, you rogue, you skewbald,
Brown eyes full of innocence,
HOW you kicked and bucked and bolted!
Is this now my recompense?
Do you sometimes think, you rascal,
As you munch your lucerne bale,
Of that day, long past, I bought you
At a dusty country sale?"

CHRISTMAS

The small town mentioned in the verse is the old town of Adaminaby, in the heart of the Southern Alps.

On the side of an emerald hill it lay,
  A tiny town at the close of day.
Wild daffodils pushed through the tangled grass.
  When lo! I saw a white angel pass!

He paused by the side of a stable door,
  And stepped inside on the earthen floor.
The light from his wings was clear and sweet,
  Wild snowdrops grew round his naked feet.

So still slept the small, deserted town;
  Great pure white snow flakes tumbled down,
Blanketing broken homes and scars.
  The angel wore a crown of stars.

The snow flakes flurried and danced and whirled.
  I stood alone in a pure white world;
Then, making hardly a sound at all,
  I softly crept to the stable wall.

The light inside was pure and fine,
  I knew that I saw a thing Divine.
Snow-drops grew where the angel trod;
  He held in his arms the Son of God.

THE DROUGHT

The tall, dry grass smelt hot and sweet
As it trembled in the noonday heat;
While silent, creeping, yellow dust
Was a living part of Summer's lust.

The distant plains glowed faded red,
Where sorrel dropped its shrivelled head.
Man-made dams lay baked and dry
Beneath a fierce Australian sky.

I led my pony to the shade
The great grey eucalyptus made.
A brown snake slid into the grass,
My dogs sprang back to let it pass.

A panting flock of new-shorn sheep
Lay huddled in a dusty heap,
They watched me there without surprise;
Their short tails twitched the irksome flies.

Old Man Drought had stretched his hand,
Caressing the once emerald land.
Slowly I gathered up the reins
And rode across the blistered plains.

WET MOUNTAINS

In the wet wilderness of the mountains, I stood quite still in the rain,
My gentle white pony beside me, my arm through her bridle rein.

The white of the clean eucalyptus, its shed crimson bark on the ground
Was sweet with the scent of the mountains, the soft falling rain made no sound.

Gold feathered grass of the ranges bent low with a diamond spray.
White dogwood, and silver mimosa shook gems as I went on my way.

It was wild and wet in the mountains as my pony and I trotted through;
The washed stones echoed with music, striking her hard little shoe.

WATTLE TREES

The first wattle tree of the season was blooming on old "Black Range."
Mythical—feathered and golden; a golden no artist would change.

I picked a spray for my jacket; another spray for my hair!
I tied a branch on my bridle, and scattered it everywhere;

The grand old range towered above me. Untidy and dark it looked down
Through the soft silver grey eucalyptus—and it wore a bright golden crown!!

PAPER DAISIES

(Round Plain Church)

I found them in a churchyard where
  The humblest flowers grow.
Bright dandelions and briar rose,
  Frail daisies tipped with snow.

They pressed against the ancient walls,
  And round each crumbling grave.
Small yellow heads on slender stems
  Like lanterns, clear and brave.

I opened wide the ancient door
  Of that small holy place.
There were no silver candlesticks,
  No cloth of finest lace.

But in a jar with broken lip
  Against the altar pressed
The wild sweet yellow daisies breathed
  A blessing for the blest.

I gathered them in armfuls
  As the soft wind blew my hair,
And held them tightly in my arms;
  Their scent was everywhere.

They bowed their heads in worship,
  Like the worshippers who wait
Among these humble mountain flowers,
  All round that churchyard gate.

VALLEY OF GEEHI

Snowy Mountains

I rode across the mountains steep;
A bridle track, too high for sheep.
Black jagged rocks where daisies grow
Thrust angry crags through drifts of snow.

Mt. Townsend reared his mighty crown
Close to the sky where storm clouds frown.
An eagle's shadow covered me
In its great grey immensity.

Below the ridge, white snow gums grew,
Weird twisted things the wild winds knew;
I touched them gently with my hand.
I loved them. Can you understand?

Far, far below a valley lay,
Deep cornflower blue at break of day.
It could have been a strip of sky
The sleeping Valley of Geehi.

Great mountains wrapped in solitude
With grandeur and with fortitude
Looked down, and cast their shadows there.
Divinity was everywhere.

THE KOOKABURRA

He sat on the branch of an iron-bark tree
And laughed and laughed as he looked at me!
There was merriment in his eyes of brown
As his proud feathered chest went up and down!

A field mouse trembled among the grass
I stood quite still as it hurried past.
It paused in its quick, uncertain run,
And that was when the damage was done.

Down from the branch the gay bird flew
And snapped the poor frightened mouse in two!
Back to the strong old iron-bark tree
He threw back his head and laughed with glee.

A reptile glided through the reeds
His wicked eyes like ruby beads.
His back, bright gilded by the sun,
Was like a sovereign newly done.

A whirr of wings above my head.
A snap—the writhing snake was dead.
The kookaburra looked at me
As he flew back to the iron-bark tree.

He shook and snapped and gave a pull—
He couldn't laugh—his beak was full!
He beat the snake into a pulp
And swallowed it with a choking gulp.

At last he turned and looked at me
And laughed and laughed with reckless glee—
Wonderful what a laugh can do—
I found that I was laughing too!

A WINTER DROUGHT

(Monaro, 1957)

In the paddock, the pipes were frozen
And the cattle trough was dry.
The bog, where one big tap had burst,
Was frozen hard—close by.
Bleak, icy wind swept off the range,
The air was grey with sleet.
We blew our red chilled fingers
And stamped our frozen feet.
"We'll walk for half a mile," John said,
As snow blew in our face.
"The horses are like 'Jumping Jacks'—
We can't make any pace.
We'll simply *have* to mend that trough
Or move the cattle out.
There's not a blade in Eight Mile now,
Thanks to this rotten drought!
And now that all these pipes have burst
And water getting low,
If we start shifting them from here
There's nowhere else to go."

We met "Old Tom" beside the tanks,
A warm hood on his head.
"I've cleared the pipes in No. 1—
A beetle block," he said;
"It happens once in every year;
The Christmas beetles fall
Into the tanks, and choke them up—
Those pipes are far too small.

I'll use the tractor for that bog
Beside the empty trough,
And push that pile of rubble in—
One load should be enough."

The powdered snow blew in our eyes,
The sky was violet blue.
Big, dark clouds banked along the range
The way they always do.
While John and Tom worked at the trough
I let the ponies feed.
They chewed the dry old corkscrew roots
And furry trefoil seed.
The snow turned into icy sleet
And stung my frozen face.
I turned my worn old collar up.
The fences looked like lace.
We boiled the billy on the plain
Behind the tractor wheel.
Our hands closed round the steaming mugs,
Too cold to even feel!
We rode home on a silvered track
Of snow, six inches deep!
The ponies' hoofs were muffled
Like the velvet shoes of sleep.

HOME AGAIN

Oh! I'm so glad to be home again!
To be home again in the Spring!
To be able to "touch" the old stone house
Is such a wonderful thing!

A eucalyptus tree close by—
A patch of blue Australian sky—
So can you really wonder why
I'm glad to be home in the Spring?

Two daffodils and a crocus bud
Peeped through the grass at me.
A thousand tightly rolled pink buds
Burst out on the apple tree:

An old dog wagged her feathered tail
When I softly called her name.
A grey cat rolled on its sleepy back
And begged me to do the same.

A eucalyptus tree close by—
A patch of blue Australian sky.
So can you really wonder why
I'm glad to be home in the Spring?

SOUTHERN MOUNTAINS

Oh, give me Southern Mountains
Where the crystal summits gleam,
And golden paper daisies grow
Beside a mountain stream.

Oh, let me ride my pony
Where the mighty mountains rise
And sleep beneath the snow gums
To watch the changing skies.

Oh, let me light my camp fire
With the scented twigs and bark
And watch the embers disappear
Like gold dust in the dark.

Oh, give me Snowy Mountains
Where the air is like old wine—
A brown trout on my gridiron—
A damper light and fine.

Oh, give me Southern Mountains
And let me ride again
From Kosciusko's summit
To distant Rocky Plain.

Oh, let me hear the clip-clop
Of the drover's horse's feet
And smell the furry blossoms
Of the eucalyptus sweet.

A pink sky in the morning.
Oh, mountains white and cold—
Deep purple in the evening
With a lining of pure gold.

PEACE

I found it in the forest of white trees—
White trees with great wide branches open flung—
Twisting in a thousand different shapes, and scattering leaves
Like tears that children shed, when very young.

So beautiful I held my breath to look at them;
To touch their bark; to feel their dappled shade;
And leaning close against a satin trunk
I heard the singing music that they made.

Tranquillity stole softly over me
Unbidden—warm and close, washed sunshine after rain.
I saw the white arms of a thousand trees
And wore the fragile crown of Peace again.

THE WIND

The wind rushed up the gully with a sobbing, sighing sound;
It left behind a ruffled lake, and broken blossoms on the ground.
But when it reached the mountain, like a small, exhausted breeze,
It breathed upon the dark green leaves
And silvered all the trees.

CHRISTMAS DAY

I sat very still on the mountain top
The evening of Christmas Day.
I was tired and thirsty and lonely, too,
For I'd travelled a long, long way.

It was hard to believe it was Christmas,
My pony's head drooped in sleep.
A kangaroo shyly passed me by,
Far below strayed a flock of sheep.

I could see their rough, woolly, outlined backs
In the gathering velvet dusk;
And smell the strong eucalyptus leaves
And sweet, wild flowering musk.

I sat quite still on the mountain top,
My arms clasped round my knees.
A mopoke called to his feathered mate
Through the silvered thick of the trees.

Then I looked up, and beheld the Lord,
His white robe bound with red;
White sandals covered His holy feet
And bright stars crowned His head.

He gathered the straying flock of sheep
To a silver mountain stream;
He held in His arms a pure white lamb;
I thought I had dreamt a dream.

When, lo! He turned and smiled at me,
A kindly, gentle smile,
And the golden light that was round His head
Shone clearer all the while.

"Oh Lord," I prayed, as He touched my hand,
"Bless me this Christmas Day
And fill my soul with Your kindly light
As I travel upon my way.

"I have far to go, and the road is rough,
And steep that I have to ride;
Oh, give me Your blessing, Holy Lord,
On this lonely mountainside."

And the Lord put His hand on my pony's neck,
While the light shone strong and clear:
"Rise up, My friend—go on your way
With courage; and have no fear.

"I will take your hand down the mountainside
And help you along your way;
It is you I have climbed the mountain for
To bless this Christmas Day."

A SONG IN MY HEART

There's a song in my heart when I'm riding along
The well-worn track in "Black Range";
    Oh! the red sun is hot,
    There's the clip-clippety-clop
Of my pony on her pilgrimage.

It's a battered old track that winds in and out
Of the twisted, bent grey-box trees;
    Clear blue is the sky,
    But the brown grass is dry
As it waits for the breath of the breeze.

I love every twist in that lonely old track,
Every wattle that grows by its side;
    Soft wild lavender,
    Dogwood in flower
And the song in my heart while I ride.

There's a small muddy pool on the right of the track
Where some brown ducks drift on a plank;
    While proud and serene
    As any crowned queen
Two black swans sleep on the bank.

In a clear open space where the trees widen out,
Tall kangaroos watch from the shade,
    As my pony and I
    Go cantering by
Through the sun-dappled summer-time glade.

I wonder sometimes while we're swinging along,
Pushing the grey trees apart,
    On that well-worn old track
    Where the twigs snap and crack,
What gives me that song in my heart!

BLACK SWANS

Nine black swans glided up and down the small lagoon;
They arched their necks, and stretched their wings in the heat of noon;
They glided faster as they watched me canter by:
There was inquiry in each round unblinking eye.

One bird, perhaps a little braver than the rest,
Climbed up the bank, and padded slowly to her nest;
From there she watched me. Peering through the dappled reeds;
Her eyes gleamed through the rushes like brilliant shiny beads.

I watched them, beautiful, untamed and gladly free;
They snapped the lucerne flowers, and turned their heads to look at me.
Then suddenly they rose; a rush of air and sunlight on their outstretched wings,
And I was left alone, so still beside the small lagoon without those lovely things.

MY PRAYER FOR THE DONKEYS

(Rome)

I passed into the shadow of Saint Peter's
And knelt upon the holy marble floor,
And before the fragrant flower-scented altar
I prayed as I have never prayed before.

"Oh Lord, save all those tiny, humble donkeys
I saw today upon the cobbled sunbaked roads
From the whip—the heavy galling harness
And the weight of those—oh!—quite inhuman loads!

"Please—let them stay just sometimes in the pastures
And rest and sleep, those gentle, long-eared things,
Away from all the cruelty of humans
For whom You, oh Lord, have promised golden wings!

"I saw, today, a tiny mother donkey
With a little one in harness by her side,
And the whip that fell was cruel and black and heavy.
Do You wonder, Lord, I bent my head and cried?

"I am begging You; and know that You will pardon
This prayer from such a lowly one,
To remember it was just a tiny donkey
Who carried on its back Your only Son."

THE RACE

Mackenzie and McGregor—McDougal and McBride
Were drinking beer; and arguing as they sat side by side.

"The old black horse is going to win," Mackenzie said; "I know—
I had it from the stable boy, that little chap called Joe."

"It's wrong you are," McDougal said. "I know who's going to win;
It's the filly with the shaggy mane, her jockey told me—Jim."

McGregor scratched his tawny hair, and pushed his beer aside.
"It's going to be the big brown horse that Dougal's going to ride.

"I know that for a fact, me lads; he's sound and strong and young;
He'll run the course while your two nags won't even have begun."

McBride jumped up; a burly man, with hair a fiery red.
"There's not a one you've mentioned yet that's going to win," he said.

"It's going to be that silver mare, her with the fancy name—
She's sired by 'Seymour Dumfries'—they call *her* 'Lady Jane'."

They argued this, they argued that, the fire was burning low.
"If it's the race we want to see," McDougal said, "let's go—

"We'll just have time to walk the street that leads towards the course.
That surely is the simplest way to find the winning horse."

The filly cantered down the straight, the dark brown horse behind.
The silver mare was next, and then the black horse, big and kind.

Last came a leggy ugly thing with scraggy mane and tail,
Brown eyes, wide set, uneasy pace, it trotted down the rail.

"They're off!" McDougal shouted, as the bell clanged in his ear.
"You see! the filly's out in front, let's give the girl a cheer!"

By some strange freak of circumstance—not knowing that they should—
The first four horses failed to round an upright pole of wood.

The jockey on the leggy horse, quick seeing their mistake,
Made up his mind, his horse's, too, the course that they should take!

The first four horses led the field and passed the winning-post.
"The filly's won!" McDougal cried; "I say let's drink a toast!

"Your horses nearly made the grade with second and a third—
I'll foot the bill tonight, me lads—a double, mark my word!"

The leggy horse came gamely in, a yard or two behind.
The numbers shot up on the board. McDougal didn't mind

Until he saw "Almost Unknown" was first upon the list!
"It's wrong you are!" he shouted, as he doubled up his fist—

"My horse has won by half a head; the brown horse came in next."
"I think they failed to round the post." McGregor looked perplexed.

"The only horse that swung right out was that long leggy colt.
I couldn't make it out at first, it looked a straight-out bolt.

"We've lost the race, and that's a fact, it's no use splitting straws,
You can't go up and claim a race against them blinkin' laws!"

Mackenzie and McGregor, McDougal and McBride
Said very, very little as they walked home side by side.

"I'll stand the drink," McDougal said, his voice full of remorse,
"And drink a toast—I swear I'll never back another horse!"

IMMENSITY

So close to the sky, almost touching, I rode quite alone the thin bridle track;
My sure-footed pony, ears pricked and cautious, trotted on slowly with reins hanging slack.

Close on my right, Mt. Townsend reared proudly, wearing a white broken diadem of snow.
Like a blue lake, through distance and snow-gums, the Valley of Geehi lay sleeping below.

Far, far above, an eagle soared slowly, casting a shadowy cloud overhead;
Wild broken crags broke through the coarse grasses. Lower down snow-gums writhed, twisted and dead.

Awed by the stillness, the great wide immensity, and by the valley that lay at my feet,
Slowly I rode down the wall of the mountain, drinking the breath of wild rosemary sweet.

Like a pale ribbon, the river wound onwards, deep in the heart of lovely Geehi—
My heart sang with joy. It was part of my country—part of her mountains, and her opal sky.

PERUGIA

Southern Italy

A young Italian girl sat near the roadside: close to a coloured door.
Her lips were stained. She held a spray of cherries in her hand,
And on the ground lay many more.

She smiled at me, a friendly smile and I smiled back. Her eyes were very blue.
In world's apart we neither understood the other's tongue —we two!

Her long, thick hair curled in a plait. Her lashes tipped with gold lay on her cheek.
All round, the silver-leafed, aged olive trees, sighed softly, inviting us to speak.

Drawn by a mule, a cart went by; so filled with flowers, a laughing boy greedily threw blossoms in the air.
I caught a red carnation, and without a word, I tucked it in the shining folds of her soft, lovely hair.

OH! THAT FRENCH!

The potato is a lady!
And if her skin is shady
It doesn't mean she isn't quite genteel!
Her eyes are small and beady—
In fact I'd call them seedy
As they stare at you from underneath the peel!

But she's "La pomme de terre" in Paris,
And it doesn't do to harass
The waiters by asking for a "Le".
They will raise their hands in horror
And lift their voice in sorrow:
"La Pomme de terre — oh, Madame, she's a she!"

When you eat her fried in butter,
It would never do to utter
The *le* — instead of *la* before her name.
Although her skin is shady,
She will always be a lady,
And that "Pomme de terre" will always taste the same!

SEPTEMBER

It swept its way across the plains and mountains.
Tall trees bent low, and white clouds raced across the sky.
Pale gold mimosa scattered all the hill tops
And danced a frenzied dance, afraid to die.

It tangled in the branches of a pear tree:
White petals fell like scented virgin snow.
It swept a sleeping lake to ruffled ribbons
And with a sigh hid where the rushes grow.

And then it found a hill of humble snowdrops.
The ears of fairy folk could hear them chime,
But it had raced away into a flowering prunus
Before the silver chimes were heard by mine.

At last—as if it tired of its dancing—
It sighed a tired, soft, uncertain sigh;
A pink magnolia heard. Its waxen pearls
Fell lightly on the springtime grass to die.

YOUTH

I smiled as a little child ran by—
Her hair was fair; she was very shy,
And her dancing eyes were like bits of sky.

A fluffy kitten came my way,
Chasing leaves in its innocent play—
A small, unwanted, winsome stray.

A silver mare with foal beside
Whinnied low with a mother's pride,
Which in her youth she tried to hide.

Two puppies played with a ball of string,
Growling and pawing the rolling thing—
Such foolishness a smile can bring!

Trailing its leaves in a silver pond,
As if in search of a world beyond,
A young tree swayed like a silver wand.

LITTLE BROWN SALLY

Harry Manning leaned on the rails of the stockyard and watched his daughter. There was an odd mixture of pride and sadness on his deeply tanned face. How she could ride! —and how she loved it! He watched her cut a rowdy young steer from the mob—wheel her horse—and gallop back for a second. She paused for a moment near the rail and laughed down at him.

It was a hard life, not only for the women, but for the men—a constant battle with heat, drought and flies. You either belonged to the great vast country and loved it with an intensity that made you forget the hardships, or you hated it with a deep consuming hate. Harry Manning and his daughter loved it—and were part of it.

Twenty-five years ago, he had come to "Billi Billi Downs" Station, on the edge of the great Finke River in Central Australia, as head stockman. He had been a lonely man, wandering from one job to another around Alice Springs and Darwin—never staying long, moving on without regrets—but it had been different at "Billi Billi." Old Jake Foster, the owner, had looked upon him as a son. Each found companionship and a deep faith in the other. They were simple people, accepting the crude, corrugated iron building that was home: working through the long days side by side with the "black boys" of the station—deeply content to sit at night on the rough verandah—smoking their pipes, and watching the countless stars that spangled the deeply brilliant blue of the northern sky.

Then little brown Sally had come—it seemed only yesterday, it was still so clear in his mind. He and Jake had just

come in from the outback station, and while he hobbled the horses, Jake had washed his hands in a tin dish on the old tank stand. He could see it all so clearly—was it really twenty-five years ago! A mule-drawn caravan had pulled in to the homestead—and three tired-looking people had clambered out. At first he had thought them gypsies, but, straightening his back and extending his hand in friendly greeting, he saw the man was white, but tanned a deep mahogany by the scorching sun of the North. The woman was a full-blooded aborigine; and then he looked at the girl. "This is our daughter Sally," the man had said. She looked up into Harry Manning's face and smiled—a shy, sweet smile. He remembered how white her teeth looked in her little brown face, and how thick and black her lashes were as she dropped her eyes before his. Old Jake had told them to draw their caravan close to the sleeping quarters and unhitch the mules. He had given them food and clothing. In the morning the caravan was gone, and sleeping on a blanket under a big eucalyptus in the yard—lay the girl. Harry rushed in to find Jake—and had shaken him by the shoulders. "They've gone, Jake! Gone—but they've left the girl. What are we going to do?" Old Jake had struggled into his clothes, buttoning his trousers as he stepped outside: why had every little detail remained so clear? The girl sat up and smiled at them. "I'm going to stay and work for Boss," she said—and that is exactly what she did. At first they had protested wildly and loudly—they would send her away—ring up the police—send her to the convent school in Alice Springs—but they did none of these things—as Sally had known they would not. The battered tin sheds that were "Billi Billi" took on a new freshness—little check curtains appeared at the paneless windows—the mud floors were swept to a hard white cleanliness.

Harry remembered the night he had leaned on the stockyard fence—just as he was doing now. He had felt he must be alone to try and understand this wonderful thing that had happened to him. Little Brown Sally had been with them six months. He loved her and wanted her, and for the first time since coming to "Billi Billi" old Jake's companionship was not enough. It was then she came and stood beside him—the moon throwing a silver band round her hair—and he had swept her into his arms and kissed her, long and passionately, feeling the soft arms round his neck and the dark hair against his cheek.

They were married in Alice Springs early one morning—Old Jake and one of the station boys their only witnesses. He had wanted to take her straight back to "Billi Billi," but Jake had protested. "Must have a honeymoon," he chuckled. "Every bride wants a honeymoon, don't they, Sally?" And Sally had laughed up at him. "Let's go to Ayers' Rock, Harry—please take me to Ayers' Rock—I've always wanted to go. My mother was born out there in one of the caves—'The Old Woman's Cave' they call it." And so they had gone. Jake lent them four of his best camels and two boys from "Billi Billi" and for days they had lumbered over the rough spinifex country—climbing one red sandhill after another—laughing at their senseless, magical honeymoon! At night they unrolled their blankets and slept between the stunted mimosa trees, and when dawn stretched her long golden fingers over the desert country, they lit their campfire and rolled a damper in the hot ashes before they started out again, for the wonder that is Ayers' Rock.

They were twenty miles away when they first glimpsed that huge violet monolith—it appeared suddenly before them, when their tired camels topped yet another sandhill—

majestic, it towered up into that intensely blue sky—unreal, even to those who have seen it. As Harry and Sally watched spellbound, it changed from violet to brick red—then blue—then pink in the vast sea of spinifex. "Oh, Harry, we're nearly there—look, I feel I could almost touch it!" She stretched out her little brown arms, and, watching the small rapt face, Harry felt a lump in his throat. "Long way go yet, Missie," Black Frankie said, pulling up beside her. "Boys don't like rock—full of evil voices—bad spirits."

"Oh come, Frankie," Harry said hastily—"good spirits—good voices—fresh water—big shelter—make good camp." But the native had shaken his head and muttered something under his breath.

The sun was low in the sky, and the breeze that stirred the she-oaks was soft and cool after the great heat of the day, when the little camel team finally drew into the shadow of the rock. Silently they gazed up at the coloured dome, and, hand-in-hand like children, they shivered in their excitement. "There's water somewhere round to the east," Harry said. "A big waterhole called Maggie's Spring—we've got to find that first, then make camp." It was Sally who found it. He heard her glad cry of excitement while he and the boys were unloading the camels. "Oh, Harry, it's beautiful"—and it was: a clear round pool of icy water at the extreme base of the rock lying in deep shadow. There were small wildflowers and delicate ferns growing thickly round its edge, and the ground was damp and green with slippery rock moss. They pitched their tent under a great she-oak; Harry and the boys pegged down the tent and lit the fire with the sweet-scented mulga wood, while Sally unrolled the blankets, and made the hot strong tea and currant damper that comprised the evening meal. When the

damper was nearly cooked, she threw thick rashers of bacon into the ashes and Harry remembered again how hungry he was—and how good it all smelt. While they ate their supper, Sally walked over to the rock and gently patted its smooth, cool sides. When the fire had burnt low, lying close in his arms, she whispered, "Are you glad Jake gave us a honeymoon?", and with his face buried in her hair he had whispered, "Oh, so glad, my darling."

During the days that followed, they explored the rock from east to west, from north to south. They walked round its five-mile base, and, climbing its difficult western side, held one another in a breathless embrace on the narrow twelve-foot ledge of rock high up the side of the great monolith, while the wind screeched and screamed round them. In the blue distance they could see Mt. Olga, and much further away the great Musgrave Range. They felt small and bewildered and excited. Sally wanted to eat the ripe wild figs that clustered on the trees close to the rock sides, but Harry had snatched them from her. "They could be poison, Sally," he said. "You musn't touch them"—and he wiped the purple stain from her full red lips.

Some nights they slept in the weather-worn caves, and traced the realistic native drawings on the walls with their fingers. "Hundreds and hundreds of my mother's people must have slept here," Sally said wistfully. "What a wonderful place for them—food, water, and shelter." She nestled close to him and he said nothing, but there was a strange light in his eyes as he stroked her hair—did she long sometimes for her mother's people? he wondered. The night they slept in the Old Woman's Cave he told her the story of a woman who originated from a burrowing animal belonging to the mole family. It was weird in there, and

the wind made a soft moaning sound. She had laughed at him, and told him "he was an old woman" to talk like that, "worse than Frankie" she had added. The last night they camped at Ayers' Rock the wind chased the clouds across the sky and bent the mulga trees and she-oaks until they looked like eerie dancers. There were no stars, except those blown from the small campfire, which whirled and vanished into the inky blackness of the night. They could not sleep. The evil voices of the rock seemed to be all round them—muttering, whispering, sighing. Suddenly, like a great silver ball, the moon broke through a bank of clouds and, to Sally's excited imagination, balanced on the extreme top of Ayers' Rock. She peered up through the branches of the oak—it hung, a huge crystal ball in the inky blackness—the wind sighed—the clouds closed again, and the miracle was gone.

It was not long after Harry and Sally returned to "Billi Billi Downs" that old Jake Foster died, and left the wild, fifty-thousand-acre cattle property unconditionally to Harry. They buried him under the mulga trees quite close to the homestead and Black Frankie carved a little wooden cross which he placed gently on the grave.

It never occurred to either Harry or Sally to alter the crude, corrugated iron buildings which formed the untidy circle under the mulga trees. The sleeping quarters, the kitchen, and the long iron shed in which they all ate and sat during the evenings were spotlessly clean—the wooden table and benches scrubbed white. The hard earth floor—washed once a week—had coarse rag rugs beside the chairs, and the paneless windows boasted blue and red flowered curtains. Six stout poles supported a heavy timber frame with grass roof, outside the buildings, and there the little family spent as much time as work would allow—breath-

lessly waiting for the sigh of a breeze to cool the stifling sun-drenched days. This simple home-made structure was the centre of life at "Billi Billi." It was there the meat was cut down each evening, and as the native boys passed in single file, each one received his portion and his plate of damper and treacle. It was there Sally had planted hardy little wildflowers—in cut-down kerosene tins, painted green—and there Harry read the tattered books and papers that formed his library, hitting at the huge flies ceaselessly with his battered straw hat. On the side of the kitchen was a small tank of precious drinking water, although, more fortunate than some, they were not solely dependent on its contents. "Billi Billi" boasted a clear, deep spring and Harry and Jake had produced a very creditable vegetable garden, where cabbages and cauliflowers grew to a remarkable size, and beetroot and lettuce flourished. During the winter months, the evenings were often cool, and Sally delighted in dragging in the "fire bucket" which consisted of a worn-out wash-tub, with small holes punched in the sides—piled high with chips and small pieces of mulga it made a circle of golden light on the hard floor, and Sally would laugh as the blue wisps of smoke curled up and out the paneless windows.

They had been married five years when Mirandie was born: Harry would never forget that first glimpse of his daughter—the soft petal-pink skin, the blue eyes and the silken fuzz that covered the tiny head. "She's white, Harry," Sally had whispered, "really white—oh, I'm so glad. I was so afraid—so terribly afraid—she'd be like me."

"Don't, Sally—don't ever say that." Harry wanted to take her in his arms, and tell her she was all that mattered—that it would always be that way—but, deep down, he felt a pride such as he had never known—his daughter was white:

even the blue tinge under the minute fingernails was missing —he uncurled the tiny fingers. "No one could ever tell," he told himself.

Another five years slipped by when, one hot March morning, Harry walked into the kitchen where Sally was making bread and told her that he and some of the boys were going out to Ayers' Rock. "After the big round-up yesterday we found we've lost a lot of cattle, Sally — of course, some might be dead—must be after that last stinking drought, and I'd like a fiver for each one that rogue Thompson's lifted—but the boys are sure we'll find some of them out in that desert country. Of course, only the old hands'll come—young ones too scared of the evil spirits! And I hear they're pretty active at Mt. Olga this year." He laughed tiredly as he picked Mirandie up and threw her into the air. The little girl chuckled with delight—her wide, blue eyes alight with mischief. Sally pushed the bread in the oven and slammed the door. "Oh, Harry, take us—please take us," she said breathlessly, "we won't be any trouble. I can carry Mirandie in front of me on the saddle, and I can help with the camp and the cooking—oh, please, Harry —it'll be our honeymoon over again—I've always wanted to go back to that wonderful rock—and I'm not afraid of the spirits at Mt. Olga!"

At last he agreed to take them: unwillingly at first, yet glad they would be with him. He had been anxious about leaving Sally and the child with only a handful of native boys and their lubras, and she had flatly refused to go to Alice Springs while he was away.

It was breaking day when the little procession started out from "Billi Billi." Harry had decided to take the horses this time—they would be needed for mustering the cattle, and

he had been told of several good water holes along the route he intended taking.

Little brown Sally was astride the old mare—slim and lovely as when he married her—the fair-haired child strapped behind: Frankie and Steve, the two native boys sat their sure-footed ponies with a careless ease, keeping the pack horses, loaded with food and camping gear, well in front of them. Harry led the procession on his big chestnut. There was a roll of blankets in front of him, and two canvas water bags hung from the saddle. For ten days they struggled bravely and doggedly through miles of sandy spinifex country—red dust—desert oaks (Casuarina) and mulga; riding often far into the night to escape some of the trembling, burning heat. When the myriad stars spangled the deep blue sky, and the white moon threw a path of silver for them to follow, Sally forgot her tiredness, and became one with the vastness, the loneliness and the miracle that is the heart of Australia.

Frankie and Steve faithfully led them to each water hole, where the tired horses drank long and thirstily, and ate the long, rank grass that grew round the crystal springs.

It was breaking day when the little procession drew into the shadow of Ayers' Rock. A blood red sun already touched the red rim of the monster, and the wind moaning round the monolith filled the dawn with its eerie whispering. Sally slipped to the ground, and stretched her stiff, cramped body as Harry lifted Mirandie from the saddle. The little girl pointed to the red ball of fury in the sky. "The sun's just getting up," she said. "Yes, and we are just going to bed, just as fast as we can get the camp together," Harry remarked grimly. Once more they camped close to Maggie's Spring under the she-oaks that looked

like toys against the walls of the rock, and tired beyond tiredness, they slept through the day. Harry planned to leave early the following morning for Mt. Olga, where the native boys were certain the missing cattle would be found. "Could we climb the rock just once before we go, Harry?" Sally had begged, "Just as we did ten years ago?" But Harry had shaken his head. "No time, little girl—you'll have all the climbing you want at Olga"—and so the gold light of morning saw them on their way again.

The thirty miles to Olga was rough, hard going. The undergrowth was much thinner, with big outcrops of rock and, of course, the spinifex. The huge, blue, shadowy domes that beaconed them on, changed from blue to rose—from rose to brown and red and violet. There were thirty-six of them, and their immensity was awe-inspiring. As the little party drew nearer, the domes resembled a row of very large loaves of brown bread — "Just like I make," Sally had laughed. Following a rocky, dry creek-bed for about a mile, they found themselves at the beginning of a deep ravine —between two of the Olga domes. The creek bed was full of mimosa, and the air was heavy with the sweet, hot scent. They paused beside a rock pool of dirty brown water. "Think we'd better call this the camp," Harry said, "the water supply isn't a hundred per cent. at Olga, and if we don't stop here we might miss altogether." He gazed up at the sheer walls of coloured rock, towering feet above him; two wedge-tailed eagles soared round and round, minute in the great distance. "Don't like it, Boss," Frankie came up beside him. "Camp lower down—bad spirits here." "Oh, for the love of Pete, shut up about the spirits, Frankie," Harry's tired temper flared, "we're going to camp here—right here—beside the water."

Sally was still asleep, with the child in her arms, the

following morning as Harry kissed her gently. "We'll be back tonight, sweetheart—if you must go climbing, take care." He had told her the night before where the deepest part of the chasm lay thick with flowers, and she had begged him to let her go.

They found her as the sun was setting, lying quite still on a bed of pink rock lilies in the depth of the great silent chasm. Between the walls, wild flowers grew in rich profusion—wanga vines and jasmine cascaded over the rocks, smothering shy daisies and scarlet desert pea—heavy scented mimosa flowers filled the air with their sweet, hot scent, and growing thickly against the great walls of Olga were the delicate pink rock-lilies. It was like a mythical cathedral, with a flower strewn floor. Mirandie was sitting beside her, crying quietly, as she threaded the pink lilies into a chain. "Mummy fell," was all she could tell them, "and then she went to sleep."

She was buried where the white wanga vines grew the thickest—deep in the heart of the country she loved so well. Dry-eyed Harry looked down on the new little grave. "Goodbye, my brown Sally," he whispered, "you'll always be with me—always—and wait for me—over the border."

The following year Harry took Mirandie to the Convent School in Alice Springs. It was a sad, difficult day for both father and daughter. One day, returning to "Billi Billi," hot and tired after a big cattle muster, Harry had found the child in one of the native wurleys on the side of the hill behind the homestead. She was sitting in the dust, gleefully pouring handfuls over her toes, and wriggling them delightedly. "Look, Daddy," she cried, "I can do it as well as Rosie and Jackie — watch me." Without a word, Harry scooped her up in his arms and carried her, struggling and

screaming, down to the "lean-to" bathroom beside the house. "If you ever go into one of those filthy holes again, I'll thrash you," he warned, pouring water over her flaxen hair and soaping it vigorously, "you're going to school, my girl, that's where you're going—to try and be a lady."

"Don't want to be a lady, won't be a lady," stormed the child, "want to be like Rosie and Jackie—I like their houses." Harry shuddered.

Time and again he had built neat sheds for his natives, and each time—miraculously—they were burnt down, and the untidy looking things that rather resembled huge birds' nests reappeared—until at last he had accepted them. Pulling a clean cotton dress over Mirandie's head, and fastening her worn sandals, he had tried to explain, "You must go to school, darling — there'll be lots of other little white girls and boys to play with, and I'll come in and see you often and bring you ice-cream and chocs. You'll love that, won't you?" But the child continued to cry quietly and hopelessly. As Harry lifted her into the 4 x 4 Ford Blitz lorry, and ploughed his way through the rough, sandy bed of the Finke River, he raised his eyes to the towering ghost gums, white and majestic. "Oh, Sally, I hope I'm doing right," he prayed, "She's only a little girl, but without you, this is no place for her—ask them to be kind to her—for me."

About sixty miles from Alice Springs, Harry pulled in to "Renner's Rock Station." This amazing muddle of tin sheds once belonged to Bob Buck—one of the oldest of the Northern pioneers. It had changed hands many times and Harry had no idea who owned it now, but he always pulled in for a drink of luke-warm water from the tank behind the house. If it was empty, as it most frequently was, he took the tin pannikin from its rusty nail and walked through the red dust

to a small spring some two hundred yards away. Sometimes he saw a dirty lubra watching him from the wurleys on the hill—but usually there was no sign of human life—only the lean cattle under the mulga trees to break the great loneliness.

He was very tired as he drove down the main street of Alice Springs, and longed to stop at the old "Stewart Arms" Hotel on the corner for a beer, but already it was growing late, and over the pedal wireless he had promised the Sisters of the Convent he would be there before dark. Mirandie, at last, was asleep beside him. He touched her hair gently with his fingers.

Sister Lyolla came out to greet him — "Come in, Mr. Manning, you must be very tired. I have some tea all ready and some lovely iced milk for Mirandie." She took the little soft hand in her worn one. "After tea, I'll take you into the school gardens and show you all the lovely things there are to play with—swings and slippery slides and hoops —and lots and lots of little boys and girls just like you." She bustled out of the room to return almost immediately with a tray laden with iced cakes and tea. Harry looked at the spotless white cloth and the blue china. Yes, he had been right, this was what Sally would have wanted for Mirandie. "You'll look after her, won't you, Sister?" he asked urgently, holding the blue cup awkwardly in his hard, brown hands. "I'll come in and see her whenever I can—and if you want anything, you can always get me over the pedal wireless, can't you?—and buy her some decent clothes and hair ribbons and things." He paused, and pushed a little roll of notes clumsily across the table. "Get her the best," he finished simply. Sister Lyolla swallowed a lump in her throat, and stooped to dust an imaginary crumb from

the carpet. "Don't you worry, Mr. Manning," she told him, "she will just be one of our daughters, I promise you."

Was it ten years ago? Harry leant on the stockyard fence and watched his daughter. "How about a cup of tea, old girl? You've got enough bull dust in that yard to smother yourself, and you've darned nearly smothered me!"

"Oh, sorry Dad, but I did want to get that bawly-faced calf." She slipped off her horse and threw the reins to a young native who had been watching the drafting display with open admiration. Tall and fair—her golden head topping his shoulders—she walked beside him towards the house. He loved her in her old blue jeans and open-necked shirt—the silken hair tied up with a check ribbon. He was so proud of her—this fair daughter of his.

"Don't know how I got on so long without you, Mirandie," he said, taking her arm. "Don't you ever want to go back to The Alice and get a job or something, like the other girls? Haven't you had enough of the heat and the dust and the droughts of 'Billi Billi'?" A shadow crossed the girl's young face. She lifted the old black kettle off the open fire, and poured the boiling water into the blue china tea pot he had given her for her last birthday, because she had loved Sister Lyolla's china so much. "I'm going to get married, Dad," she said. Harry put his cup down steadily—the pain behind his eyes made him close them for a moment. "Well, I guess I might have expected it," he said slowly, "best thing in the world any way if you find the right one—and he is the right one, is he, Mirandie?"

"Yes, Dad," her blue eyes met him squarely, but they were full of tears. "Well, there's nothing to cry about," Harry said, too heartily. "Is he a nice chap, Mirandie? One of those nice young chaps you introduced me to in The Alice—

the day you were playing tennis?—I think you said they worked in the bank or something—I forget." He remembered how proud he had been of her that day—gay and laughing in her fresh, white shorts—the centre of everything. "He's a nice chap, Dad—but not one of those," she paused — "it's Tim Buckley." Harry gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles showed white. "Not — not Black Tim who runs the mail?"

"Yes, Dad, that's right—he's coming to see you as soon as I tell him he can." Harry said none of the terrible things that rushed to his lips, but nothing could hide the cruel, naked pain in his eyes. Mirandie took his hand in hers. "I'm sorry, Dad, terribly sorry for you. Tim's a great chap —those others—the ones you saw, they wouldn't marry me, Dad—we had lots of fun together, but they wouldn't marry me—they all knew about me—everyone at the Convent knew, too—it had to be this way, Dad—it just had to be. After we're married, we're going out to Ayers' Rock and Olga, just like you and mother did."

Somehow, Harry crossed the courtyard, and climbed down the bank to the dry bed of the old Finke—somehow he reached the white ghost gum that stood bigger and whiter than any of the others—where he had found comfort and solace after Sally's death. The hours slipped by, and a pale moon climbing the dark red sandhills found him still there —his burning forehead pressed against the cool, white bark. "Oh, Sally, forgive me," he prayed, "it had to be—it had to be."

JUST A ROOM

I was sitting in the small dinette that looked over the back courtyard and the oldest portions of Coolringdon. It dated back one hundred and twenty years. The house was very still, and I was quite alone, except for the two black dogs who lay beside me.

I was alone—but not lonely—I could never be lonely at Coolringdon. To me there were people everywhere—some perhaps faded a little with age and time, but still very real. I could hear their voices, feel the touch of their hands. Some I had loved so much—many had come and gone, passing shadows in the life-time of the old house.

The dinette had been newly papered. It was a bright, cheerful paper, with small red geraniums growing in neat black pots. The old sideboard was the same I used to lean on as a child, and play with the loosely swinging handles. There was a green plate of fruit on it now. The plate was old, too, and had grapes raised up on its smooth surface.

The chair I was sitting on was old. It had a straight back and a basket seat, and in spite of its severe appearance was very comfortable. A round bowl of ivy was hanging on the wall and the long tendrils hung down and touched the white window ledge.

It was a funny, homely room. I looked back into the past, and remembered how many times it had changed its funny twisted shape!

When I knew it first, it was a bedroom with a white-washed fireplace, a small window, and a large patch of damp on the wall, which always told us when it was going to rain.

It was a bedroom for many years—the curtains were green and mauve, with a mauve frill round the edge, and

the bedspread was the same. There was a step down into the room, and strangers to it always tripped, and clutched the wall.

Then it became a dining room—a sheltered nook with yellow curtains and a rather worn green carpet. The mantelpiece was painted white, and I always remember a tiny painting that stood on it—it was a bowl of blue flowers in a frilly gold frame.

Yet again, it became a sitting room—the dining room table was pushed into one corner, and two armchairs were placed beside the fireplace. The fireplace smoked. It always had; but since the room became a sitting room, it smoked more than ever!

The day I remember most clearly was a very cold one in May. I was emptying a desk of old papers, and burning many of them in the white-washed fireplace. It was a sad day. Each piece of paper told a story. There was one old book I tried to burn—its pages curled back with crackling sighs, yellow and blackened; but it would not burn. Clouds of smoke blew down the chimney, and in the morning the old book was still there; something that wanted to stay with the living.

One of the dogs stirred at my feet and I looked round the cheerful dinette. From the window, the old building was smothered in honeysuckle, mock orange and cabbage rose. They had been there too as long as I could remember.

A shadowy figure stretched up slender arms and filled her apron with pink blossoms—

"Give me one," I begged.

"They are all for you, darling."

* * *

"Come on, dogs — walk!" I said, and we went out gaily into the summer sunshine.

THE OLD HOUSE

(Part of this story is quite true!)

I had intended spending my holidays hiking in the far North of Scotland, and although it was the middle of August the weather was bitterly cold and wet. My commonsense urged me to return without delay to Inverness or Edinburgh, but my other self urged me on: to see what was round the next exciting bend. Nearly every night I sought the hospitality of small inns whose "Bed and Breakfast" signs dotted the road at frequent intervals, and thoroughly enjoyed the good, hot food and sweet-scented peat fires it was my good fortune to share.

On two memorable occasions I was forced to sleep out! The first night I rolled myself in my fleecy grey blanket and settled myself as well as I could in the extremely damp heather. About 4 a.m. I was awakened by something warm and wet caressing my face. Too petrified to move I opened my eyes and looked straight into those of a black-faced mountain sheep, who appeared to greatly enjoy caressing my cheek!

The second night it was raining heavily and very cold. The welcome "Bed and Breakfast" signs were becoming less and less frequent as I travelled further north. Quite unexpectedly I came to one of the most picturesque span bridges I have ever seen, and to my joy there was a wide ledge underneath, a little to one side. Gathering armfuls of heather I made a damp, luxurious-looking bed. However, as the night wore on and I found myself drifting into uneasy sleep, every bone in my body seemed to lodge on the stone ledge underneath the heather, and when it was light enough for me to gather my crumpled self together, I felt I closely resembled Harry Lauder's walking stick!

The weather grew steadily worse as I neared Kylestrome, and wind and rain beat against me as I neared the loch. To my dismay there was no sign of the ferry which I hoped would carry me from one side of the loch to the other. It was nearly dark and the wind whipped the surface of the water into angry white-crested waves. A little to the west of the loch, an old weatherworn inn perched precariously on a cliff. As no one was in sight I decided to climb the slippery stone steps and seek shelter and information about the ferry. Stooping my tall head I stepped through the low doorway into a small dining room, from which a steep ladder appeared to lead straight into an attic. Down these steps a dour landlady descended, and with arms folded across her ample bosom almost glared at me.

"Could I have some tea?" I asked meekly, "and is the ferry going to run tonight?"

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't—all depends on the weather," and with that enlightening reply she went out and slammed the door.

Miserably I wandered down to the edge of the loch again, and my relief knew no bounds when I saw the ferry staggering drunkenly towards me. As the ferry-man jumped ashore I hardly dared ask him my all-important question—"Are you going across tonight?" The man turned his collar up under his ears and shook the water off his cap.

"Going to give her a trial run," he said, "there's a van on the other side that wants to get across real bad—you can risk your neck if you want to."

Gingerly I stepped on to the slippery punt and, grasping my wet rucksack, sought the small shelter for passengers at one end. Almost immediately we plunged forward again, and like a large, ungainly crab made our way across the

loch. Twice we were blown off our course while white waves hissed and spluttered round us. Finally we reached the far side, and I scrambled up the bank. The van slid down past me, and I heard it land with a hard thud; then a churning sound, and I knew I was standing quite alone in a rapidly approaching darkness. Looking back I could see the dim outline of the inn on the cliff and the one pale light. I had thought of asking for accommodation, but my presence was so decidedly unwelcome I had thought better of it; and surely the "Bed and Breakfast" signs would reappear, and before long I would find myself snug and warm beside a sweet-smelling peat fire!

The road in front of me was very narrow and winding. Mountains, dark and forbidding, could be faintly seen through the driving rain. The wind rose in intensity. There must be habitations of some kind soon! I had walked for about half a mile when I suddenly became aware of a house in the distance. My relief was so great I shouted out loud with joy as I hastened towards it. It appeared quite a large building, some distance from the road. As I drew nearer I was rather surprised to find no road or path leading to it. Hesitating only a moment, I plunged into the wet heather.

The house was much further than I had thought from the road, and after struggling against wind and rain and falling several times into unseen holes, I found myself breathless when at last I touched the cold grey walls. There was no sign of life. The door swung desolately backwards and forwards as each fresh gust of wind roared past in its frenzy.

Although convinced the house was empty, I knocked loudly before stepping over the sodden threshold. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, I realised the room

was empty of furniture, but a small, dark object moved in the corner. Approaching softly, I saw lying on a heap of straw a black cat, with two very small kittens. She was tied to the wall with a piece of twine attached to a bent nail. As I approached, she struggled frantically to free herself.

"Steady, old girl," I muttered, fumbling for my penknife. "How in the dickens did you get tied up here?"

Realising I was friend and not foe, she lay still while I slipped the thin strong cord from her neck, and lay panting, her huge eyes gleaming like torches in the darkness. Suddenly I became aware of a sound behind me, and noticed for the first time a small door which was very slowly opening. Had I been the cat, my fur would surely have stood on end; as it was I remained rooted to the spot, hardly daring to breathe. Inch by inch it opened, and, to my amazement, an age-old woman came into view. With one hand she supported herself on a thick, short stick, and the other clasped a worn black shawl round her shoulders. Wispy white hair fell round her face, which was shrunken and lined and seemed centuries old.

"I beg your pardon," I stammered, remembering my belated manners. "I thought the house was empty and came in for shelter."

"What are you doing with my cat?" The thin voice was high and shrill, as she bent over and hugged the cat to her—then, as if she had forgotten, she turned back into the second room.

"Come to the fire and dry your clothes. You have come a long way—a long way." The voice sounded like the sighing of the wind outside.

This room was much smaller than the one we had been in.

A broken pane of glass in the only window rattled ceaselessly. A stretcher stood in one corner; a rough table and two stiff-backed chairs completed the furnishing. As the wind seized the old house in its anger, raindrops, large and cold, blew into the room and spattered the sodden earthen floor.

The only light came from a peat fire smouldering on the open hearth. Beside it stood a three-legged cauldron from which, I realised suddenly, came the most exciting hot smell of food.

"Bring your bowl and taste some of my broth." The old voice was high and shrill—almost a command.

Obediently I picked up a blue china bowl from the table and watched greedily as the small figure filled it to the brim.

"Drink it, drink it. It is full of good things, warm things, scented things. You will feel warm when you have drunk and you will want more. The cauldron is never empty."

Hungrily I emptied the bowl. A delicious, exciting warmth filled me. The room became less desolate. The fire burned more brightly on the hearth. The weird stooped figure became less grotesque. I felt terribly sleepy. If only I could go to sleep. The longing became an obsession. The tiny old woman leant over my shoulder—

"Goodnight, traveller; sleep well. That is your bed." She waved vaguely towards the stretcher in the corner.

"But," I stammered, struggling to my feet, "you—where——" She looked at me slyly, and her feeble, quavering laugh sent a chill down my spine.

"Oh, I go higher—much higher." I rubbed my eyes and when I looked again the room was empty. All kinds of odd thoughts drifted through my sleep-fogged mind.

How could she be going higher? And where? There was no second storey to this old house. What was the hot, exciting smell that came from the cauldron? Why had I never smelt anything like it before? Suddenly I thought of the cat! Feeling my way across the room, I pushed open the door and fumbled my way across to the corner. The bed of straw was still there; the thin twine and the bent nail on the wall, but no cat! No kittens!—I was dreaming——. I *must* be dreaming. There was no other way to account for the odd things that were happening. The fire was almost out, and no coaxing of mine would rake the ashes into a flame. Throwing myself on the stretcher and drawing my blanket over me, I tried to sleep. The wind rose in its frenzy and when I lay quite still the cold raindrops beat in on my face. At last, in spite of my great discomfort, I drifted into an uneasy sleep. It was something cold and wet on my face that wakened me; not the fresh drops of rain, but something large and slimy. I tried to call out, but knew no sound came.

"She was going higher—much higher!" Of course, she was a witch on a broom. It was her cold, wet hand on my face!

Springing out of bed, I stood for what seemed like hours, shuddering in the darkness. In my rucksack was a box of matches—where had I dropped my rucksack? When at last I struck a spluttering match, in the tiny circle of light it made, sat a large toad, its bulging eyes blinking back at me with a certain mixture of fear and indignation. I dropped back on the stretcher. Relief made me want to laugh. The broth! The hot broth! The cauldron that was always full! I was so cold now, my hand shook as I struck a second match and fumbled my way to the hearth. The

cauldron stood just as I remembered it. Uncertainly, I touched the sides. It was cold, with an age-old coldness. I dipped my finger inside. To my complete astonishment it came out with a thin rim of dust on it. I peered inside. The cauldron had not been used for years. The faint light of my match showed holes in the bottom and a frail cobweb across the top which my finger had broken. Somewhere above me I heard a wild cackling laugh.

It was breaking day when I pushed open the sagging door and plunged into the wet heather again. Only once I looked back at the dark outline of a house behind me, and saw quite plainly a light in the window. The wind screamed round me as I stumbled into the highway, and, careless now of time and place, plodded onwards.

Suddenly I felt myself a midget figure in a circle of light as a car drew up beside me.

"Want a lift? You look all in. Where did you come from? The ferry has only just started working again."

"Thanks," I mumbled, climbing in beside the driver. "I slept in that old house over there, the one in the heather, on the right." I waved vaguely.

The driver looked at me curiously.

"No house there, boy—used to be years ago, but somehow it got burnt down. Story is an old witch lived there, mad as a hatter she was; set fire to it one night and burnt everything, lock, stock and barrel. Gossips have it her cat wanders about sometimes, glaring at the moon (when there is one) with huge green eyes, and one story has it they found a broom in the heather and an old three-legged cauldron full to the brim with hot broth—just a story, you know, a crazy story."

I sat quite still and closed my aching eyes. When I opened them it was daylight, faint and pale, but surely daylight.

"Coming to a village in a few secs. Want me to drop you off?" My companion nudged me in the ribs. "You've had a sleep and a half, you have—you sure were all in."

* * * *

Eating bacon and eggs and drinking steaming coffee at a small whitewashed inn, a fire crackling cheerfully in the grate beside me, I tried to laugh at myself. Was it a dream? Had it really happened? I looked at my hands which I had scrubbed hard in the tiny bathroom of the inn—round the top of my third finger on my right hand was an unmistakable rim of grime!

What really happened?

No one, not even I, will ever know!

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